



Mumtaz Embroiders Her Dreams

*Jolly Rohatgi
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‘Mumtaz Embroiders Her Dreams’ by Jolly Rohatgi

Illustrations: Ram Soni

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Mumtaz Embroiders Her Dreams

Written by Jolly Rohatgi

Illustrated by Ram Soni





It was Meethi Id, a time for celebration for everyone in Lucknow.

The people in the bazaar were all wearing new clothes. The shops were filled with sweets—imartis and laddoos, syrupy jalebis, dil bahars and chamchams. There were also delicious savouries: meat kababs and sizzling potato tikkis. The chowk was well known for its shops selling all kinds of food, cloth and silver jewellery.

Mehrunissa and Kamrunissa and their brother Azhar Mian were carrying bundles of gifts and leaf plates full of sweets and savouries. They were very proud of the new clothes with fine chikan embroidery that they were wearing, presents they had received for Id. Mehru's kurta had deep pink flowers and Kamru's had floral and paisley designs. Azhar Mian was particularly pleased with his new cap which was very finely embroidered.

Abbu, their father, was a contractor. The wholesale merchants in the chowk gave him fabrics which he got embroidered by women in their homes in fine chikan work. The women were paid by the merchant for every piece they worked on. Abbu, too, got a commission on each piece.

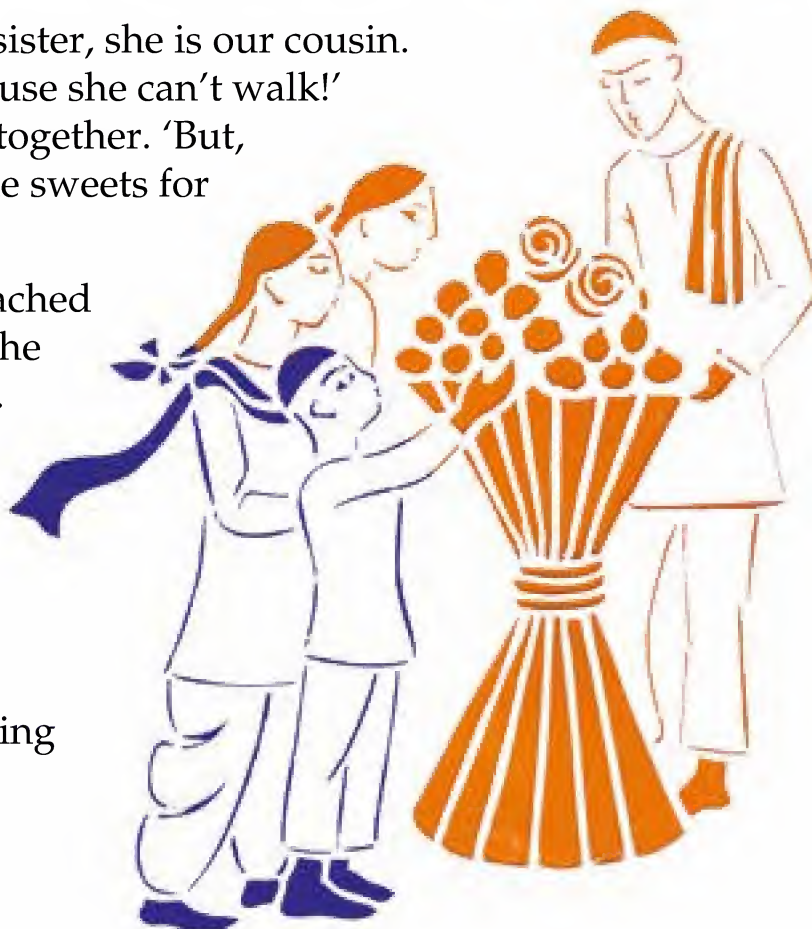
Since Abbu made enough money, Ammi, their mother, did not have to do embroidery like the other women. Kamru and Mehru went to the

madrassa in the mosque, while Azhar went to the boys' school. Kamru and Merhu did do some embroidery, and everyone praised their work more than it deserved because their father was the contractor who got work for all the women in the neighbourhood.

Suddenly Azhar stopped. 'Nobody is giving a thought to our third sister who is at home and is not wearing anything new today,' he said.

'Mumtaz is not our sister, she is our cousin. And she is at home because she can't walk!' said Mehru and Kamru together. 'But, yes, we should take some sweets for her too.'

The children had reached the fair on the banks of the river Gomti by this time. There were many tempting things for sale—glittering glass bangles, ribbons, necklaces, clay birds, animals, soldiers and dolls! There was something for everyone. Filled with excitement, the children forgot all about their cousin.



Mumtaz sat alone in the house of Abida Khala, the children's aunt. Her crutches were in a corner nearby. She held a piece of embroidery in her hands, but her thoughts were far away—in Hardoi where her ammi and two sisters lived. Were they missing her as much as she missed them?

After Mumtaz's father had died, there had never been very much money. One day, Abida Khala came and asked her mother to gather all the women of the mohalla to do their embroidery work together.

From then on, the women sat together on *charpois* and mats in their courtyard each day, listening to songs on the radio as they worked away on the fabrics. Mumtaz's job was to provide tea for the younger women, while the older khalas had their betel-leaf boxes always at hand. Gossip was always hotter than the tea, but work went on relentlessly till the evening when each woman folded her embroidery to go home and prepare dinner for the men who would return soon from work.

The fabrics they embroidered were collected by Abida Khala, who sent it to Kamru and Mehru's Abbu. He sent back payments and more fabric.

A while ago, Mumtaz had been sent to Lucknow with Abida Khala to learn new chikan stitches that she could teach the women in Hardoi. Though it was far from home, Mumtaz was not too unhappy. She had her special parrot Munia and two pigeons Lakka and Lotan, who she had brought from Hardoi with her.

All the three birds were very talented. Lakka could fly to amazing heights. Lotan was an astounding tumbler, dancer and acrobat, constantly





active. Munia could actually mimic human speech! Mumtaz continuously coaxed Munia to imitate her. As Mumtaz worked, Lakka and Lotan were always up to their antics. They would eat the grain they were offered and fly off into the clouds, only to come back minutes later for more food.

Mumtaz also made a new friend in Lucknow. This was Munnu, the local vegetable seller's eight-year-old son. He accompanied his father as he went around vending his wares and calling out in his special sing-song way, '*Sabzi leylo-o-ooo!*' Recently, he and Mumtaz had become friends. Every day, she would share her snacks with him, and they would sit and watch Lakka and Lotan play.

On the day of Id, as the two friends sat together watching the birds, Munnu noticed that Mumtaz looked as though she was going to cry. 'Why are you sad, apa?' he asked. 'Are you thinking of Hardoi? Do you have more birds there?'

'No, no more birds, just my mother and my sisters Rehana and Salma,' Mumtaz said. She picked up her embroidery.

'Who taught you this embroidery?' Munnu asked.

'Chikankari has been in our family for three generations. I learnt from my



mother and she learnt from her mother,’ said Mumtaz.

‘My nani was from Fatehganj in Lucknow, which was famous for two kinds of embroidery, katao-cutwork and chikankari.

She told me stories of nawabs and begums; of the baradari, the twelve-door palace; and of ghazals and shairi.

She used to cook delicious biryani, kababs and savaiyan. She always wore a white chikan chadar; I still have it.’

Mumtaz’s face brightened as she told Munnu about her grandmother. ‘I have always seen my mother with embroidery in her hands, the needle going in and out of the fabric all day long.’

‘You mean, she never went out of the house?’ Munnu asked.

‘Only occasionally, to buy the groceries or to visit relatives. Even Rehana and Salma don’t go out very often, and they wear a dupatta when they do. My mother wears a burqa. My sisters never went to school, but I studied till class eight. After that, I have been home, learning how to do this from my mother and sisters,’ said Mumtaz.

‘So you did go to school!’ said Munnu admiringly. He had never been to school at all as he had been helping his father since he was a little boy.



‘Yes, I am one of the few girls among chikan workers who went to school. My mother cannot read and write. She could never calculate how much the merchant should pay her for her work. I helped her with the counting but, later, since we needed more money, I started embroidering too.’ Mumtaz paused and said softly, ‘I miss her so much, sometimes I cry all night.’

Munnu wanted to cheer his friend up so he changed the subject. ‘Do you have dreams at night?’

‘Oh, I dream I am flying away, just like Lotan and Lakka. I travel to many places,’ said Mumtaz, ‘and maybe one day I’ll be able to meet my nani ...’

‘Go quickly and get your nani’s chadar. I’ll show you a trick,’ said Munnu commandingly. He told her about a man he had met on his rounds with his father, Chand Pasha, an old and ailing magician. Chand Pasha had taught Munnu an amazing trick and Munnu wanted to use it to make Mumtaz cheer up.

Mumtaz fetched the chadar. It had been her grandmother’s last gift to her, embroidered with her own hands. The work was beautiful—even the bakhia on the edges, the fine little running stitches, were perfect.

‘Close your eyes and hold on to one end of the chadar. I will take the other end. Now take a deep breath, and think hard about what you want,’ Munnu said.





Mumtaz thought about flying high above the clouds to visit new lands, see new people. She felt she was running like the bakhia, faster, faster ... and even faster. Lotan picked up one end of the chadar in his beak, and Lakka the other, so she and Munnu rose above the ground, and into the skies.

They flew to a faraway land. The mountains were blue, the skies were blue and filled with many kinds of birds. Below them was a green valley of fruit-laden trees and flower-filled gardens. Lotan and Lakka landed near a turquoise-coloured lake.

By the lake, hunched over their work, were a group of men wearing warm phirans. They were embroidering woollen shawls, using very fine needles. The designs they stitched were motifs from the landscape around them—colourful flowers and leaves and birds.

The eldest among them, Khurshid, greeted Mumtaz and asked where she was from.

‘Lucknow,’ said Mumtaz. ‘I am a chikankar.’

Khurshid showed her the shawl he was embroidering. ‘Look,’ he said, ‘I have put all the birds and flowers of Kashmir into my shawl. Here is the gulistan, which means eye of flowers, and here are the bulbuls. This is the chashm-e-bulbul, which means the eye of a bulbul. Just as a bulbul can see all around it, so this stitch looks the same from all sides!’ He showed her how it was done.

Mumtaz's nimble fingers worked on the shawl as she learnt the new stitch.

Khurshid offered Mumtaz and Munnu some hot Kashmiri tea and freshly-baked bread. He told them how many years ago Kashmiri artists had gone to the courts of the nawabs in Lucknow and worked with the chikankars there.

After a while, Lotan and Lakka returned, and bidding goodbye to their new friends, Mumtaz and Munnu flew back to Lucknow. Before they knew it, they were back in Abida Khala's house. Munnu had to rush off as his father was calling.

Mumtaz busied herself with her embroidery, her head full of the new designs she had seen. In a few days she created a marvellous kurta full of birds and creepers and flowers. At the centre of each motif was the chashm-e-bulbul.

All the other women saw the piece and were amazed at the wonderful embroidery and imaginative designs.

Instead of being happy that their cousin could create something so beautiful, Mehru and Kamru were jealous.

'How does Mumtaz know such designs? She does not go out anywhere, does not see anything, yet she makes these fine designs in such beautiful colours,' said Mehru.

'There must be something we can do to stop her from getting all this praise,' said Kamru.



The sisters thought hard. One evening, when Mumtaz had gone to fetch food for Lakka and Lotan, Mehru hid all the coloured fabric that Mumtaz had been given to embroider, leaving only the white fabric. She also took away all Mumtaz's coloured thread. 'Ha!' said Mehru. 'Let's see if she can still win praise!'

The following day, Munnu found Mumtaz sitting sadly next to her birds. She told him how she had only white fabric to embroider. White was considered the most difficult colour to work on as it got dirty easily. 'And what designs will I do without coloured thread?' she asked sadly.

'Cheer up!' said Munnu. 'Get your nani's chadar and think deeply. See what magical land you might find today!'

This time, Mumtaz and Munnu flew to a land without colour. It was an ancient land, filled with people walking or riding in fine carriages. But there was one thing very strange about the land. Everyone wore only white—smooth, fine, radiant white. And there was very fine embroidery on their clothes.

Under a neem tree by the wide road, Mumtaz saw her grandmother. With a cry of joy, Mumtaz ran to her.

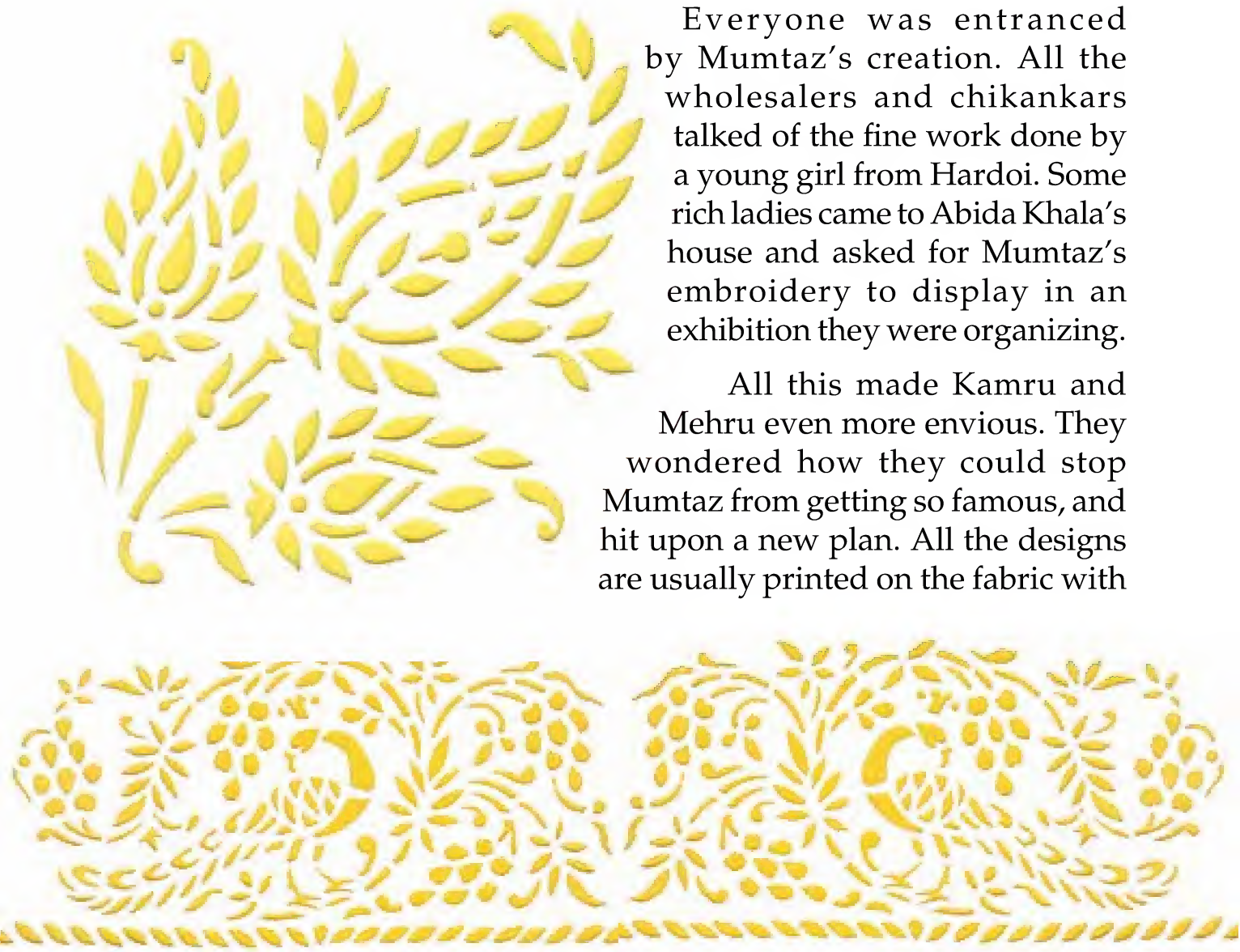
Nani hugged and kissed Mumtaz. 'Why are you sad, Mumtaz?' she asked. 'Coloured fabric was not meant for chikan work at all. Traditionally, the fabric for embroidery was always white mulmul, since it was meant mainly for men. Now, since women also wear it, people embroider on different kinds of coloured fabrics. But the best chikan work is done with white thread on a white mulmul ground. That is the heart and soul of chikan, the greatest test of a needlewoman's skill.'



When Mumtaz came back, she took a large piece of fabric and began to embroider flowers using white thread. The leaves resembled the mangoes of Hardoi and the almonds of Kashmir. She created an elegant peacock in the midst of flowering bushes. The whole chadar was magical!

Everyone was entranced by Mumtaz's creation. All the wholesalers and chikankars talked of the fine work done by a young girl from Hardoi. Some rich ladies came to Abida Khala's house and asked for Mumtaz's embroidery to display in an exhibition they were organizing.

All this made Kamru and Mehru even more envious. They wondered how they could stop Mumtaz from getting so famous, and hit upon a new plan. All the designs are usually printed on the fabric with



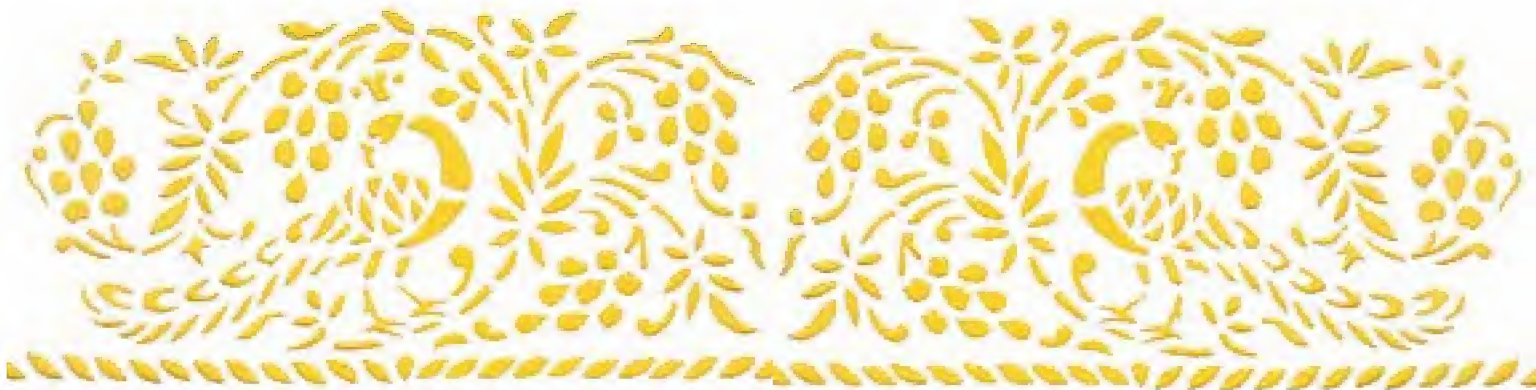
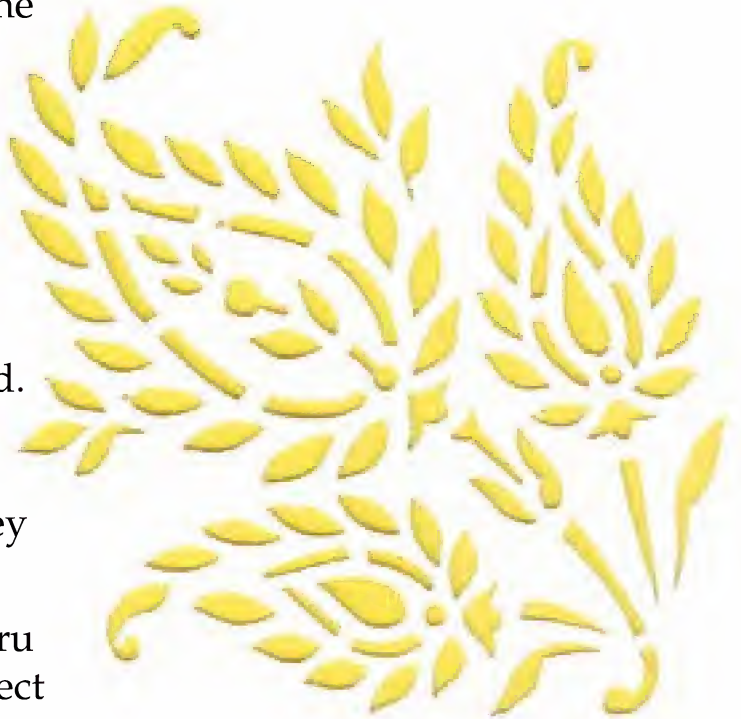
washable ink. After the chikankars embroider these, the fabric is washed to remove the pattern.

Kamru and Mehru refused to get fabric printed for Mumtaz. But that did not stop her. Mumtaz's head was so full of all the beautiful things she had seen in her dreams that she did not need any other designs.

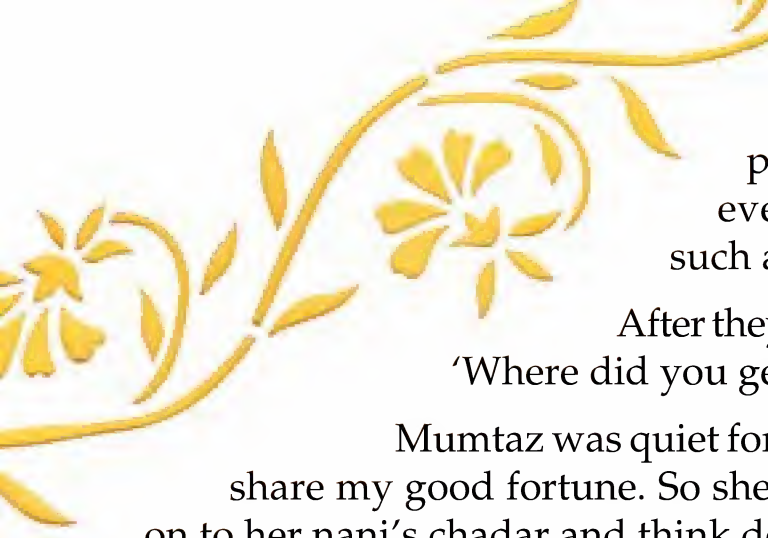
One day, Mumtaz heard wonderful news. The wonderful chadar she had created on the white fabric had won an award!

Mumtaz was invited to go to the town hall to receive her award. She asked Kamru and Mehru to come with her. They were ashamed of their ill will when they saw how happy she was.

At the awards ceremony, Kamru and Mehru saw with what respect







people treated Mumtaz. Some people even congratulated them for having such a talented cousin.

After they came home, Kamru asked Mumtaz, 'Where did you get all these wonderful designs?'

Mumtaz was quiet for a while. Then she thought, I should share my good fortune. So she smiled and invited Kamru to hold on to her nani's chadar and think deeply.

Kamru did so, looking a bit puzzled. All she could see were Munia, Lakka and Lotan up to their usual antics.





About the illustrations

The ancient art of paper cutting is practised in the cities of Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh. Traditionally, fine tree bark was used, though now many varieties of paper are used as well. The elaborate designs are usually of religious scenes, flora and fauna, textile motifs and geometric patterns. This intricate paper craft is used to decorate idols in temples, create stencil pictures of gods on cloth or stencils for children. Coloured sheets or metallic paper is placed under the stencil to give colours or shine to the picture.

Dastkari Haat Samiti is a large organization of Indian craftspeople, working to improve the social and economic status of people engaged in traditional handicraft skills. Local forms of painting and craftwork have been used to illustrate this series of four stories to encourage the sharing of varied cultural expressions. This work was made possible with the support of UNESCO, New Delhi.



Pratham Books was set up in 2004, as part of the Read India movement, a nation-wide campaign to promote reading among children. Pratham Books is a not-for-profit organization that publishes quality books for children in multiple Indian languages. Our mission is to see "a book in every child's hand" and democratize the joy of reading. If you would like to contribute to our mission, please email us at info@prathambooks.org.



Jolly Rohatgi has spent a lifetime in the crafts sector and works with children with special needs through Jan Madhyam, an NGO. She has documented the lives and economic needs of craftspeople in Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, and has worked on many studies, design projects and crafts exhibitions. She has been associated with the Oxfam India Trust, Oxfam Wereld Winkles (Belgium), Les Magasins du Monde and UNDP in the United Nations Volunteer programme.



Ram Soni, of Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, practises sanjhi, the art of paper cutting. This is the first time sanjhi art has been used to illustrate a book. Ram Soni has won many awards for his skilled workmanship.

Young Mumtaz has come from her village to Lucknow to learn new stitches for the *chikankari* that she and the other women in her village do. Thanks to her friend Munnu, Mumtaz learns even more than she had imagined! Jolly Rohtagi's sensitive story is illustrated by Ram Soni through *sanjhi*, the art of paper cutting.

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